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AKED WARRIORS

HERBERT READ

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NAKED WARRIORS

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NAKED WARRIORS

BY

HERBERT READ

And there were some that went into the battle naked and unarmed, fighting only with the fervour of their spirit, dying and getting many wounds

1919
ART & LETTERS
9 DUKE STREET
ADELPHI, LONDON, W.C.2

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PARODY OF A FORGOTTEN BEAUTY

War through my soul has driven
Its jagged blades:
The riven
Dream fades—
So you'd better grieve, heart, in the gathering night,
Grieve, heart, in the loud twilight.

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PREFACE

I WOULD like to speak for a new generation to the following effect:

We, who in manhood's dawn have been compelled to care not a damn for life or death, now care less still for the convention of glory and the intellectual apologies for what can never be to us other than a riot of ghastliness and horror, of inhumanity and negation. May we, therefore, for the sake of life itself, be resolved to live with a cleaner and more direct realisation of natural values. May we be unafraid of our frank emotions, and may we maintain a callous indifference to the falsely-artistic prettifying of life. Then, as the reflex of such stern activity, may we strive to create a beauty where hitherto it has had no absolute existence. From the sickness of life revealed let us turn with glad hearts to the serenity of some disinterested beauty. In that way we may so progress that our ethical rage give us duly an æsthetic sanction.

H. E. R.

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NOTE: KNEESHAW GOES TO WAR originally appeared in "Art and Letters."

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KNEESHAW GOES TO WAR

Reule thyself, that other folk may rede
And trouthe shall delivere, it is no drede.

CHAUCER.

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KNEESHAW GOES TO WAR

ERNEST KNEESHAW grew
In the forest of his dreams
Like a woodland flower whose anæmic petals
Need the sun.

Life was for him a far perspective
Of high black columns
Flanking, arching and encircling.
He never, even vaguely, tried to pierce
The gloom about him,
But was content to contemplate
His finger-nails and wrinkled boots.

He might at least have perceived
A sexual atmosphere;
But even when his body burned and urged
Like the buds and roots around him,
Abashed by the will-less promptings of his flesh,
He continued to contemplate his feet.

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Kneeshaw went to war,
And they set about with much painstaking
To straighten his drooping back:
On bleak moors and among harsh fellows
He kissed the elemental.

But still his mind reflected things
Like a cold steel mirror—emotionless;
Yet in reflecting he became accomplished
And, to some extent,
Divested of ancestral gloom.

Then Kneeshaw crossed the sea.

Arrived at Boulogne
He cast a backward glance across the harbours
And saw there a forest of assembled masts and rigging
Rather reminiscent of former abodes.
And, like the sweep from a released dam,
His thought flooded unfamiliar paths:

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This foreſt was congregated
From various climates and ſtrange seas:
Hadn't each ship some separate memory
Of sunlit scenes or arduous waters?
Didn't each bring in the high glamour
Of conquered force?
Wasn't the foreſt-gloom of their assembly
A body built of living cells,
Of personalities and experiences
—A witness of heroism
Co-exiſtent with man?

And that dark foreſt of his youth—
Couldn't he liberate the black columns
Flanking, arching, encircling him with dread?
Couldn't he let them spread from his vision like a fleet
Taking the open sea,
Disintegrating into light and colour and the fragrance of winds?
And perhaps in some thought they would return
Laden with ſtrange merchandise—
And with the passing thought
Pass unregretted into far horizons.

These were Kneeshaw's musings
Whilſt he yet dwelt in the romantic fringes.

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Then, with many other men,
He was transported in a cattle-truck
To the scene of war.

For a while chance was kind
Save for an inevitable
Searing of the mind.

But later Kneeshaw's war
Became intense.
Arras was a picnic;
But Ypres. . . .
That ghastly desolation
Sank into men's hearts and turned them black—
Cankered them with horror.
Kneeshaw felt himself
A cog in some great evil engine,
Unwilling, but revolved tempestuously
By unseen springs. . . .
He plunged with listless mind
Into the black horror.

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There are a few left who will find it hard to forget
Polygonveld.
The earth was scared and broken
By torrents of plunging shells;
Then washed and sodden with autumnal rains.
And Polygon beke
(Perhaps a rippling ſtream
In the days of Kneeshaw's gloom)
Spread itself like a fatal quicksand,—
A sucking, clutching death.
They had to be across the beke
And in their line before dawn. . . .
A man who was marching by Kneeshaw's side
Hesitated in the middle of the mud,
And slowly sank, weighted down by equipment
and arms.
He cried for help;
Rifles were ſtretched to him;
He clutched and they tugged,
But slowly he sank.
His terror grew—
Grew visibly when the viscous ooze
Reached his neck.
And there he seemed to ſtick,
Sinking no more.
They could not dig him out—
The oozing mud would flow back again.

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The dawn was very near.

An officer shot him through the head:
Not a neat job—the revolver
Was too close.

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Then the dawn came, silver on the wet brown earth.

Kneeshaw found himself in the second wave:
The unseen springs revolved the cog
Through all the mutations of that ſtorm of death.
He ſtarted when he heard them cry "Dig in!"
He had to think and couldn't for a while...
Then he seized a pick from the neareſt man
And clawed passionately upon the churned earth.
With satisfaction his pick
Cleft the skull of a buried man.
Kneeshaw tugged the clinging pick,
Saw its burden and shrieked.

For a second or two he was impotent
Vainly trying to recover his will, but his senses prevailing.
Then mercifully
A hot blaſt and riotous detonation
Hurled his mangled body
Into the beautiful peace of coma.

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There came a day when Kneeshaw,
Minus a leg, on crutches,
Stalked the woods and hills of his native land.
And on the hills he would sing his war-song.

Liſten now to Kneeshaw's war-song:

The foreſt gloom breaks:
The wild black maſts
Seaward sweep on adventurous ways:
I grip my crutches and keep
A lonely view—
In wildernesses I forgot
Gardens immaculate.

I ſtand on this hill and accept
The pleasure my flesh dictates.
I count not kisses nor take
Too serious a view of tobacco.

Judas no doubt was right
In a mental sort of way;
For he betrayed another and so
With purpose was self-juſtified.
But I delivered my body to fear—
I was a bloodier fool than he.

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I stand on this hill and accept
The flowers at my feet and the deep
Beauty of the still tarn:
Chance that gave me a crutch and a view
Doubtless gave me these.

The soul is not a dogmatic affair
Like manliness, colour and light;
But these essentials there be:
To speak truth and from this hill
Let burning stars irradiate the contemplated
sky.

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THE SCENE OF WAR

And perhaps some outer horror,
some hideousness to stamp beauty
a mark
on our hearts.

H. D.

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I.—Villages Démolis

THE villages are strewn
In red and yellow heaps of rubble:

Here and there
Interior walls
Lie upturned and interrogate the skies amazedly

Walls that once held
Within their cubic confines
A soul that now lies strewn
In red and yellow
Heaps of rubble.

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II.—The Crucifix

HIS body is smashed
Through the belly and chest,
And the head hangs lopsided
From one nailed hand.

Emblem of agony,
We have smashed you!

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III.—Fear.

FEAR is a wave
Beating through the air
And on taut nerves impingeing
Till there it wins
Vibrating chords.

All goes well
So long as you tune the instrument
To simulate composure.

(So you will become
A gallant gentleman.)

But when the strings are broken. . . .
Then you will grovel on the earth
And your rabbit eyes
Will fill with the fragments of your shattered soul.

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IV.—The Happy Warrior

HIS wild heart beats with painful sobs,
His ſtrained hands clench an ice-cold rifle,
His aching jaws grip a hot parched tongue,
And his wide eyes search unconsciously.

He cannot shriek.

Bloody saliva
Dribbles down his shapeless jacket.

I saw him ſtab
And ſtab again
A well-killed Boche.

This is the happy warrior,
This is he. . . .

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V.—Liedholz

WHEN I captured Liedholz
I had a blackened face
Like a nigger's,
And my teeth like white mosaics shone.

We met in the night at half-past one,
Between the lines.
Liedholz shot at me
And I at him;
And in the ensuing tumult he surrendered to me.

Before we reached our wire
He told me he had a wife and three children.
In the dug-out we gave him a whiskey.
Going to the Brigade with my prisoner at dawn,
The early sun made the land delightful,
And larks rose singing from the plain.

In broken French we discussed
Beethoven, Nietzsche and the International.

He was a professor
Living at Spandau;
And not too intelligible.

But my black face and nigger's teeth
Amused him.

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VI.—The Refugees

MUTE figures with bowed heads
They travel along the road:
Old women, incredibly old,
And a hand-cart of chattels.

They do not weep:
Their eyes are too dark for tears.

Past them have hastened
Processions of retreating gunteams,
Baggage-wagons and swift horsemen.
Now they struggle along
With the rearguard of a broken army.

We will hold the enemy towards nightfall
And they will move
Mutely into the dark behind us,
Only the creaking cart
Disturbing their sorrowful serenity.

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MY COMPANY

Foule! Ton âme entière est debout
dans mon corps.

JULES ROMAINS.

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I.

YOU became
In many acts and quiet observances
A body souled, entire. . . .

I cannot tell
What time your life became mine:
Perhaps when one summer night
We halted on the roadside
In the starlight only,
And you sang your sad home-songs,
Dirges which I standing outside your soul
Coldly condemned.

Perhaps one night, descending cold,
When rum was mighty acceptable,
And my doling gave birth to sensual gratitude.

And then our fights: we've fought together
Compact, unanimous;
And I have felt the pride of leadership.

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In many acts and quiet observances
You absorbed me:
Until one day I stood eminent
And saw you gathered round me,
Uplooking,
And about you a radiance that seemed to beat
With variant glow and to give
Grace to our unity.

But, God! I know that I'll stand
Someday in the loneliest wilderness,
Someday my heart will cry
For the soul that has been but that now
Is scattered with the winds,
Deceased and devoid.

I know that I'll wander with a cry:
"O beautiful men, O men I loved,
O whither are you gone, my company?"

This is a hell
Immortal while I live.

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II.

MY men go wearily
With their monstrous burdens.

They bear wooden planks
And iron sheeting
Through the area of death.

When a flare curves through the sky
They rest immobile.

Then on again,
Sweating and blaspheming—
"Oh, bloody Christ!"

My men, my modern Christs,
Your bloody agony confronts the world.

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III.

A MAN of mine
lies on the wire.
It is death to fetch his soulless corpse.

A man of mine
lies on the wire;
And he will rot
And first his lips
The worms will eat.

It is not thus I would have him kissed,
But with the warm passionate lips
Of his comrade here.

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IV.—1

KENNETH FARRAR is typical of many:
He smokes his pipe with a glad heart
And makes his days serene;
He fights hard,
And in his speech he hates the Boche:—
But really he doesn't care a damn.
His sexual experience is wide and various
And his curses are rather original.

But I've seen him kiss a dying man;
And if he comes thro' all right
(So he says)
He'll settle down and marry.

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IV.—2

BUT Malyon says this:
"Old Ken's a wandering fool;
If we come thro'
Our souls will never settle in suburban hearths;
We'll linger our remaining days
Unsettled, haunted by the wrong that's done us;
The best among us will ferment
A better world;
The rest will gradually subside,
Unknown,
In unknown lands."

And Ken will jeer:
"The natives of Samoa
Are suitably naïve."

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V.

I CAN assume
A giant attitude and godlike mood,
And then detachedly regard
All riots, conflicts and collisions.

The men I've lived with
Lurch suddenly into a far perspective;
They distantly gather like a dark cloud of birds
In the autumn sky.

Urged by some unanimous
Volition or fate,
Clouds clash in opposition;
The sky quivers, the dead descend;
Earth yawns.

And they are all of one species.

From my giant attitude,
In godlike mood,
I laugh till space is filled
With hellish merriment.

Then again I assume
My human docility,
Bow my head
And share their doom.

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THE EXECUTION OF CORNELIUS VANE

Le combat spirituel est aussi brutal que la bataille d'hommes; mais la vision de la justice est le plaisir de Dieu seul.

ARTHUR RIMBAUD.

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THE EXECUTION OF CORNELIUS VANE

ARRAIGNED before his worldly gods
He would have said:
"I, Cornelius Vane,
A fly in the ſticky web of life,
Shot away my right index finger.
I was alone, on sentry, in the chill twilight after dawn,
And the act coſt me a bloody sweat.
Otherwise the coſt was trivial—they had no evidence,
And I lied to the wooden fools who tried me.
When I returned from hospital
They made me a company cook:
I peel potatoes and other men fight."

For nearly a year Cornelius peeled potatoes
And his life was full of serenity.
Then the enemy broke our line
And their hoſts spread over the plains
Like unleashed beads.
Every man was taken—
Shoemakers, ſtoremen, grooms—
And arms were given them
That they might ſtem the oncoming hoſt.

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Cornelius held out his fingerless hand
And remarked that he couldn't shoot.
"But you can ſtab," the sergeant said,
So he fell in with the reſt, and, a little group,
They marched away towards the enemy.

After an hour they halted for a reſt.
They were already in the fringe of the fight:
Desultory shells fell about them,
And paſt them retreating gunteams
Galloped in haſte.
But they muſt go on.

Wounded ſtragglers came down the road,
Haggard and limping
Their arms and equipment tossed away.
Cornelius Vane saw them, and his heart was beating wildly,
For he muſt go on.

At the next halt
He went aside to urinate,
And whilſt away a black shell
Burſt near him.
Hot metal shrieked paſt his face;
Bricks and earth descended like hail,
And the acrid ſtench of explosive filled his noſtrils.

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Cornelius pitched his body to the ground
And crouched in trembling fear.
Another shell came singing overhead,
Nowhere near.
But Cornelius sprang to his feet, his pale face set.
He willed nothing, saw nothing, only before him
Were the free open fields:
To the fields he ran.

He was still running when he began to perceive
The tranquillity of the fields
And the battle distant.
Away in the north-east were men marching on a road;
Behind were the smoke-puffs of shrapnel,
And in the west the sun declining
In a sky of limpid gold.

When night came finally
He had reached a wood.
In the thickness of the trees
The cold wind was excluded,
And here he slept a few hours.

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In the early dawn
The chill mist and heavy dew
Pierced his bones and wakened him.
There was no sound of battle to be heard.

In the open fields again
The sun shone sickly through the mist
And the dew was icy to the feet.
So Cornelius ran about in that white night,
The sun's wan glare his only guide.

Coming to a canal
He ran up and down like a dog
Deliberating where to cross.
One way he saw a bridge
Loom vaguely, but approaching
He heard voices and turned about.
He went far the other way,
But growing tired before he found a crossing,
Plunged into the icy water and swam.
The water gripped with agony;
His clothes sucked the heavy water,
And as he ran again
Water oozed and squelched from his boots,
His coat dripped and his teeth chattered.

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He came to a farm.
Approaching cautiously, he found it deserted.
Within he discarded his sopping uniform, dried himself and donned
Mufti he found in a cupboard.
Dark mouldy bread and bottled cider he also found
And was refreshed.

Whilst he was eating,
Suddenly,
Machine-guns opened fire not far away,
And their harsh throbbing
Darkened his soul with fear.

The sun was more golden now,
And as he went—
Always going west—
The mist grew thin.
About noon,
As he skirted the length of a wood,
The warmth had triumphed and the spring day was beautiful.
Cornelius perceived with a new joy
Pale anemones and violets of the wood,
And wished that he might ever
Exist in the perception of these woodland flowers
And the shafts of yellow light that pierced
The green dusk.

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Two days later
He entered a village and was arrested.
He was hungry, and the peace of the fields
Dissipated the terror that had been the strength
of his will.

He was charged with desertion
And eventually tried by court-martial.
The evidence was heavy against him,
And he was mute in his own defence.
A dumb anger and a despair
Filled his soul.

He was found guilty.
Sentence: To suffer death by being shot.

The sentence duly confirmed,
One morning at dawn they led him forth.
He saw a party of his own regiment,
With rifles, looking very sad.
The morning was bright, and as they tied
The cloth over his eyes, he said to the assembly:
"What wrong have I done that I should leave these:
The bright sun rising
And the birds that sing?"

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"KILLED IN ACTION"

For in all things it is well
to exalt the dignity of Man
by freeing him as far as
possible from the tyranny of
non-human Power.

BERTRAND RUSSELL.

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This prose episode—a chapter from an unfinished novel—completes and summarises the judgement of war expressed in the foregoing poems.

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DANVERS dwelt in a security of darkness—the inner darkness of sleep and the outer darkness of the dug-out. But not for long. At 7.20 a.m. the earth he dwelt in began to throb with a dull incessant tremor, like the piſton-pounding of some infernal engine in the black bowels of the earth. Hammers of Vulcan. Piſton-throbs of the revolving world.

Louder were the intermittent kraoump, kraoump of nearer shells falling, marking the time of this infernal symphony.

Kraoush! Danvers hurtled into darkness like a diver from a height into a wet dark sea. That one was near. He could hear the débris falling in a shower at the dug-out entrance. Then he felt the tremor of the ground and heard the kraoump—kraoump. Hell! A barrage. He muſt get up. His limbs were cold and numb, and his clothes were clammy cold: he had had them on for goodness knows how long. The ſtink of that shell penetrated into the dug-out. He fumbled for a match, and whilſt he fumbled the sergeant-major came in with a light. His face was shiny and excited and his contracted pupils rolled about like beads on white saucers.

"We're for it," he cried, as he ſtuck the candle on the shelf. "The buggers are pelting us like hell. S.O.S. on right and left. Shall I put ours up?"

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"Yes." Danvers lurched off the wire bed-frame. His teeth chattered and he couldn't stop them. Involuntary shivers passed down his body. He must control himself: he must go out and see his men. Set an example. Duty. He sipped a tot of rum and felt its flame within his belly. He reached for his tin-hat and his revolver.

This damned Salient! But you can't expect a soft time always, and they had had six months down Arras way. They knew they were for it when they came north. Now evidently they had got it. The previous night they had relieved the remnants of a battalion which had attacked and taken the ridge they now held. And this was the not unexpected counter-attack.

His battalion was the right battalion of the division. His right rested on a sunken road which pierced the line at right-angles. On his left was "C" Company. Then the next battalion held the scarred stumps of a wood: Devil's Wood. "D" Company, with Flint in command, held a position seven hundred yards behind him at the foot of the ridge.

Danvers emerged into the riotous open. The earth was in eruption. An almost uniform din, compounded of separate heavy detonations, quivered in the air. The earth gushed up in sudden sprays. Bitter smoke clouds drifted down into the valley, obscuring all but the immediate environment. Ah! The shell that had awakened

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him fell there. Three untidy inert corpses. There was no regular trench to proceed along; just a ragged joining of shell-holes. He stumbled towards the right. Baistow would be there with his platoon. A reliable fellow, Baistow. Liked by the men. There was an infernal babbling of machine-guns on the right. The Boche must be in sight there. If so, the barrage would be lifting. Our barrage was damned poor. Eugh! Dudd! A great heavy ball of blood shot to his gullet as he drew his body taut to receive the expected detonation. The thing furrowed the ground not two yards from his feet. Harmless enough. But God! What a fright. Did he duck? Well, it was only natural. He looked at his men. They lay cowering on their bellies, their throbbing hearts pressed to the slimy soil. A shell burst fifty yards further on. It must be in the trench. Might as well go on. Next one might drop where I stand now. All a matter of chance.

He came to the crater of that last shell. Yes, poor fellows, two or three lay bleeding, débris among débris. And God, yes! Baistow. Rolled up like a kitten, but dead, most evidently dead.

A sudden cry on the right. Fierce fusillade. A hatless, bleeding man running towards him. Yes? "Fritz coming down the road behind us": that was intelligible above the din. The division on the right had given way. Now they were outflanked. God, the case looked hopeless! He drew

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his revolver. No good leaving all these men where they were. He detailed a Lewis-gun team to cover the road. They wouldn't be seen again, but that couldn't be helped. Good death—saving their mates. They might get captured. He gave orders for the rest to withdraw to the left. There was a bank further down that switched off behind them. They might make a protecting flank there. The barrage had now ceased on the front line. They were pounding the supports. Poor Flint.

They got back to the bank, about 20 of them. The two platoons on the left seemed to be all right so far. No sign of any Boche in front. The thought had hardly completed itself when a flight of machine-gun bullets came whistling overhead *from the left rear*. Devil's Wood had gone! The plan was clear now. Their front was to be taken by outflanking tactics. They were almost surrounded. They must hold on until the counter-attack was launched. He sent a runner back to Headquarters with a message: they couldn't hold out for long: the counter-attack must be immediate.

They crouched on the trembling earth, waiting. The barrage had died down considerably on the right. All objectives gained, no doubt. On the left it was as riotous as ever. He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. For two hours and forty minutes he had been unconscious of time: he had existed in a different duration, a duration measured in agonies.

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A sudden uproar of machine-guns and rifles. After all, they were making a frontal attack. There on the left, hundreds of them, their advance covered by the machine-guns in Devil's Wood. No shells. Multitudinous crackling and burr of rifle-fire. There! Half-left, over the crest, they came. Hundreds. His Lewis-gun on the left opened on them. He could see them falling; now one, then two or three in a heap. The Lewis-gun suddenly stopped. Stoppage? Or the team knocked out? He couldn't tell. The guns in Devil's Wood were sweeping along the line. They tremblingly crouched into their shallow shelters. The enemy came on. On the left they were in the line. He could see a few men running back. Others surrendering, overwhelmed. It was bloody. There was no movement on the right. On the left by now the Boches were in possession as far as the junction of Danvers' switch line with the main line. He could see a Boche helmet, not two hundred yards away.

The rifle fire had died away. Then our barrage opened on the old line. Damnably near to them. The shells were falling as near as twenty yeards in front of Danvers. They must be right on the fellows further on the left.

There was only one thing to be done. The bank they held made the dip of the slope behind pretty steep and hollow. Ten yards further down and they would be in "dead" ground. It was worth

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chancing. And as they were they would only be captured or blown to hell by their own artillery. But they must not go in a body: they must trickle down one by one. He made his intention known to a corporal who was sharing a shell-hole with him. There were a few men nearer the line who wouldn't get down. Still, the enemy were crouching in terror of the descending shells. The corporal crept out to the right: Danvers went to the left. There was no difficulty in getting his intention known. The men were very uneasy at the nearness of the shells, and most of them had already formed the intention: they were only waiting for the lead.

Danvers reckoned there were about fifteen got safely down. There could not have been many more to come.

From the hollow of the slope it was about 150 yards to the line held by the support companies. They paused to get their breath and nerve. Then they trickled across.

Danvers stumbled right on to Flint. They clasped hands, but didn't say anything. Danvers lay back exhausted.

Shortly afterwards they received orders to make a counter-attack at 5 p.m. in conjunction with the troops on the left and right. The ——th Brigade had been ordered up to reinforce the counter-attack, but it was doubtful if it would be in position by that time. At any rate, at five

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o'clock they must go forward with the remainder of the line.

A strange but blessed stillness came over the scene, as though the guns had vomited themselves to death. The men lay on the wet earth, some of them listlessly eating food they happened to possess.

Danvers had sunk into a dazed reverie, sleepless and bitter. The day's riot still tingled in his brain: his tingling brain lurched like a pendulum, but without forcing into action his volitional machinery. An image would present itself without, however, getting gripped in any process of thought. The past was a remote elusive mirage. The present was mechanical. He chewed some tinned beef, but without sensation or appetite. He answered Flint's questions monosyllabically.

He gradually sank into a stupor, a tense unconsciousness. Then suddenly he awoke. Flint was there with him, writing out a message. The sky was uniformly grey and dull. He arose and stretched his numb limbs.

From his position he could see the whole of the shallow valley stretching to Devil's Wood on the left horizon. All was black and upriven. In the valley the shell-holes were full of water and re-reflected the harsh cold sky. Devil's Wood was a naked congregation of shattered trunks, like an old broken comb against the skyline. An emo-

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tion—a sudden realisation and anger—flushed his brain. This was his earth, earth of green slopes, earth of lithe green trees, earth of vigorous sap and delicate growth.

Now riven and violated; a wide glabrous desolation; a black diseased scab, erupted and pustulous. The black shell-holes were like earthy lips puckered to kiss—lips of Mother Earth, incestuously desirous—parched sucking lips eager for his wet red blood.

He looked at his watch. 4.30. The reinforcements ought to be here if they were going to be any good. No time to get into position. They would have to attack without them. Flint was getting the men ready. He must help Flint.

4.45.—Our barrage was to come down at 4.50. No reinforcements. If the people on the right were strong enough, perhaps all would be right.

He joined Flint. "We'll stick together, old man." "Rather."

The guns opened. The first salvo hurtled and screamed above their heads, followed immediately by the rolling detonations.

"They're dropping short!" The majority of the shells were falling half-way between their position and the enemy's.

"Not thick enough," shouted Flint.

"No damned good at all."

The retaliation opened. The arched trajectories crossed. Explosive babel.

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"Three more minutes," shrieked Flint, showing his watch.

Danvers nodded.

Time. The barrage would be lifting.

"Now, men!"

They left their shallow defences. Danvers looked across the valley. All the way across men were walking forward, rather scattered, like flies crawling across a side of bacon in a grocer's shop.

They were all right for two hundred yards: dead ground of the hollow slope.

On the crest they would meet the machine-guns. Doesn't matter. Clench your teeth.

God! how forlorn they looked. Flies on bacon.

The crest now. They would take it walking. Bodies pitched forward as in a hailstorm.

They had got it on the left. An infernal racket of machine-guns and rifles. Getting nearer. Sweeping. Sweeping nearer, like a breeze across a cornfield.

The bullets shrilled fiercely above their heads. He saw men dropping—there on the left. One by one, crumbling on the ground as in some sudden dissolution.

Now for it.

Flint sprang forward with a cry, his right hand flung skywards with its menacing revolver.

"Rush it, lads!"

A bullet hit him in the snout. He fell down, sniggering blood, dying.

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Danvers glanced at him. Poor devil. Muſt go on.

They were in the full blaſt of it. Get down. Muſt do it in short rushes now.

Up. Vibrant tang of bullets in flight. Men dropping all over the place. When would his turn come? Let it be soon—soon.

Again. Blind onward drift. Not many left now. The few hesitated, wavered, fell dead. Get down!

There were not a dozen men left within five hundred yards of him. Hopeless. They were only a hundred yards from the line, but it was hopeless. The Boches were sniping now. The laſt man near him was hit in the head.

All was hopeless. Might as well crouch here in this shell-hole. Getting dark now.

Wedge. Conic wedge. Red conic wedge of pain—it entered between his contracted eyebrows, and there was slowly, decisively driven in by the hovering power of despair.

He rammed his head againſt the soft crushed earth. The cold shadows of evening deepened cruelly.

Flint. Yes, Flint. Killed. Sniggering blood.

The firing had ſtopped now. It would soon be dark. He might crawl back then. Alone. Defeated. Damned if he would.

He would die.

He jumped up suddenly, facing the enemy. A

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wild energy blazed in every gesture. "Fire, damn you, fire! Kill me, you bloody swine."

No answer. A man coughed somewhere.

The darkness, mistily blue, deepened.

He sank sobbing to the earth.

Presently he felt the cold. At some time he had unconsciously urinated: he began to feel the discomfort of his sodden breeches.

He stood up again. His revolver dangled heavily on its lanyard.

He was very calm with a sudden intent.

He pointed the revolver towards his face. Six neat holes, death ready to leap from their clean neat lips. He curled his index finger round the trigger. He was beautifully conscious of the finger's smooth movement—of the small contracting muscles. He curled and opened it a few times.

A squeezing motion, you remember.

He saw the hammer move slowly away from him. A squeezing motion. Infinitely slow retrogression of hammer, the striking-pin a thin sinister black tooth.

A sudden snap and nothing else. A misfire. His eyes opened wide with the agony of a sudden unleashed tension of will. His strained hands trembled. His parched throat emitted a scream.

He stared and screamed at the six neat black holes before his face. Unconsciously he was again squeezing the trigger. The hammer moved

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back, gaping with its one black tooth. A sinister grimace. Motion of inevitable intent.

The night, hitherto secretly stealing towards him, made the sudden leap of a vast and incredible animal, to devour his life with blackness and annihilation.

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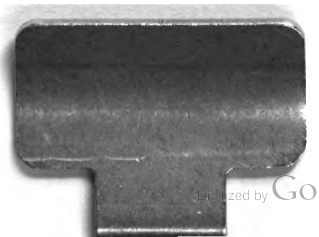
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